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Prose From a Farmhand on a Red Rose

Macy Petty

I have never seen a wild rose grow red. They always dot the grass or climb tree trunks in a self-important pink. Some are light and frail like little ballerina skirts dancing across the green, some are the same tasteful magenta as the winter coat and matching hat that the mayor's wife wears to church every Sunday of Advent, but none are the color of blood, the color that mothers make daughters wipe off their lips before leaving the house. I have wandered every field on this side of the county, plowing or planting or sometimes just walking, and have never found a bold rose. At this time of spring, I was desperate, for with the passing of May and the arrival of summer amid the already unforgivable heat, all the wild roses and corn flowers would fade and give way to more practical abundances of squash and green beans.

I was looking very hard for my queen flower as I made my way to town that afternoon. I had itched for my break all morning; it was too nice a day to waste on hacking weeds from between rows of infant corn. The sky was mostly overcast by innocent looking clouds that were sure to darken into thunderheads later, but patches of

sunlight occasionally passed through oak branches and painted dull, uncentered mosaics on the dusty road. I was thankful for the slight breeze that rippled the grass in the cow fields to the side of the road. I had been able to work for the morning without sweating through my shirt and making mud of the dust on my face, so perhaps the lady I was going to pick up would not take me as a confirmation that she had come to live in a backwater town known only for bad news and even worse manners.

She had come to such a place of course. Such was the entire purpose of her departure from a bustling, jazz-playing city on the coast to live in the spare room of a farmer's widow and her farmhand son, to teach a room packed with farmer's children with her fine women's college education. The rhetoric around the thing at church the previous Sunday was as desperate as my gazing through roadside lilies and dandelions for an exceptional bloom that morning. To hear the pastor's wife tell it, she was our only hope to mold our children into scholars that might reach beyond the county line, seeking out a future devoid of a good piece of land to plow up or a good man to build them a house. The choir director seconded this assertion with the insistence that we all do our best to make her feel welcome, to make her want to stay. My mother resolved then and there that frying chicken and deviling eggs to perfection for the teacher's first lunch would still any urge to depart, and had anxiously tasked me with personally greeting her and riding alongside her in the pastor's car to deliver her to our home.

She had good reason to be nervous. I was sure the reverend had not deigned to come and pick me up this afternoon because I had questioned his theology far too often, and I was just as apt to meet this situation with skepticism. Those Sunday morning effusions about this woman had made me shift resentfully in the pew. As one of the poor youths who had been confined to this town, I wanted to

make clear that I was not hindered by lack of learning but by lack of means. Almost twenty years ago, the well trained lady who was my teacher had been brought in from out of town, and taught me to read everything I got my hands on, to follow every spring of curiosity that broke ground in my mind, but no amount of learning could produce a sum of money that could send me away for higher education. Rising to chorus "I'm a child of the King" along with the other congregants that morning, I didn't resist too hard as cynicism sprouted like a weed.

This girl would leave as soon as she found there was no dance hall or theater to take off to in the evenings. All the young men would tell her she talked way over their heads and none would be able to take her anywhere besides the café on main street, maybe somewhere nicer the next town over if they had been paid that day. She wouldn't be patient enough with the children, would get into fights with fathers about pulling them out of school to work. Yes, she'd pack her fine clothes and head back to paved roads and department stores before the leaves really began to fall.

I had expressed all this to my mother at Sunday dinner and she hissed in reply that I should be ashamed of myself. I did not think so. I meant no slight against the girl by it, I was sure she would be the very pride of the finishing school, mousy and polite, aware of her good fortune and never unkind about our lack thereof. Of course, she would be smart, but she would be that scared kind of smart that voraciously learned and repeated back everything that books and school mistresses told her. She would not rock the boat with talk of anything besides what the age-old lesson plans told her to teach about. I did not doubt her qualification or her good intentions.

Nor would I blame her for leaving. I just hoped she would be as dreadfully boring as I had imagined her, so I would not get used to quality conversation only to lose it all together. I didn't worry much

over that, though. I had heard enough about her to discern she probably never sought out any knowledge that she wasn't tasked with learning, and outside the schoolhouse she would probably embroider her way through idle gossip with the ladies who brought her here.

Worse yet would be if she stayed and did what she was meant to do. Inspire the children, she might. A few may even be able to go to college, but those who couldn't would end up like me. I had a head full of daydreams, and eyes that saw to the very ends of the earth, but feet that would stay forever planted on these dusty roads. Because of it, I couldn't even look forward to meeting a new face for knowing what she might bring about.

I came upon the church, marking halfway to town, just as the sun came out from behind the clouds. Ceremonially, I looked up at the cross that topped the steeple and gazed over the town. There was a lightness and clarity that came over me in the presence of this building for a reason that was fixed between fond memory and child-like faith, despite the dissembling and duplicity that existed within its walls at times. I had learned "love thy neighbor" from my Sunday school teachers as a child, and as an adult now saw that the thought didn't quite reach its fruition when a scandal among the congregants was concerned. The duplicity continued in me though, I realized, as I had done nothing but discredit their young teacher since I first heard her name. Not very loving or very neighborly.

I was thinking of how to best push back my pessimism, how to shake her hand with the hope that she would be what we needed, when I saw it.

For rehearsing variations of, "hello there, welcome to town," I almost missed a little flash of deep scarlet beneath an oak tree about ten yards away on the right side of the road. I paused and blinked, taking off my glasses and putting them back on again to be sure. In the patch of grass shaded by the tree and littered with old fall leaves

there was a single minuscule bloom. I dared not believe my eyes but still walked faster, wanting to see it quickly, but not too quickly as to spoil the anticipation.

Even from seven or eight yards away, I could tell it was a wild red rose, the finest, most regal shade of red I had ever seen, like blood and wine. The queen flower had bloomed across my vision at last, otherworldly in its beauty yet familiar, like a vision from my wanderings between pages of type. As I approached, still scarcely believing, I wrestled with whether or not I should pick it. Surely this find would be best preserved between the pages of my Bible, tucked between the verses of a joyful psalm. No, like the prize fish with a multitude of hooks already in its mouth, she deserved to live another day. More than bold and unseemly, this hue was defiantly intense. It was not just the rouging of cheeks or the spilling of blood, it was the very color of a beating heart deep down inside.

Except it was not red at all. As I arrived beneath the canopy of the tree, I saw that its thick leaves were merely shading another commonplace growth. This variety of rose was more winter coat than tulle skirt, and certainly not the singular specimen I had taken it for in the shadows. I could see now that many other buds were about to spring open around it, all the same. I released something like a sigh mixed with a bitter scoff and turned to walk away, only for a few of the thorns to grab at my pants leg. I shook them off a little more violently than I meant to. Perhaps they were trying to change my mind, to stop me from seeing only with my mind's eye, but I would have none of it.

Main Street was in its typical afternoon stage of lifelessness when I reached its center. The barber hummed in his shop as he shaved a face I couldn't quite see through an open window and a one-horse cart carrying a man and some pine boards made its way down the street. The courthouse stood stoic down the road, its big

grey stones boasting no authority these days, as not the first criminal case had been held there this year. Most of the shop windows were dark, most everyone having not returned from their homes or emerged from their back rooms for lunch, each taking their time in knowing that they would probably have only one more customer before closing at five. The silence became a bit off putting as I approached the train station and the barber's humming faded away. I could not find it within myself to take up the tune, I was still disappointed by the dull flowers. Spring had offered its best already, I resigned. There would be no orchestral thunderstorms and the emerald fields of wheat grass would not shine like oceans in the sun. Perhaps these were all stories that I told myself, not lived experiences, never seen, never real, though they should be. Any whistling I might have done was cut off by that of the train.

I tried to feel real, to shake myself from this stupor of melancholy as I neared the platform. By the time I got there, the engine had ceased its puffing and the sparse passengers were beginning to disperse. There were only five left in a single car, a family of four who I did not recognize, probably coming to deliver their children to grandparents for the summer. Our girl had not yet stepped off. I recognized the reverend on the other end of the platform by his shock of white hair. He was fanning himself with his hat and looking for her with squinted eyes. I hung back as to leave all the first impression to him, as charm was his way of keeping congregants. His face shifted slightly to the left, and I followed his gaze to the door nearest to me.

What I saw first was red.

Red lips, red shoes, and a red string of beads around her neck. She looked right at me as she stepped carefully – not daintily – onto the metal steps. I couldn't quite make out what color her eyes were – a mossy green or hazel – but deep like churning water nonetheless. She had on more cosmetics than I had seen a woman wear in these

streets. Her cheeks were roughed almost to the point of indecency, and the skin of her face looked like china, especially with dark ringlets of hair blowing across it.

Her lips shocked me the most – what a mockery! Why, they were the same color as that elusive flower, the same shade I had just imagined on the road.

There was divine laughter in this, I was being taught a lesson. I had taken her for a girl who floated on air, a girl of obeying and pleasing and giggling, a girl of pink. But this crimson woman smiled at me and strode over to the reverend with wide clomping steps and smirked at the little wrinkle forming on his forehead. He said something and she let out a loud, bellowing chuckle. Behind it I could hear years of saying “no” to being quiet, to wearing something a little less loud, to being a little more polite. Turning, she looked at me curiously with eyes full of knowing, and I would not have been surprised if she uttered my name then and there. I was frozen; she exacted a kind of magic that was as familiar, like staring wide eyed at wrapped Christmas presents in childhood, as it was entirely foreign.

There might be a chance after all. I decided this only because there was no way of knowing what this type of woman would do. I could predict the commonplace flower, but I had never seen anything like her before.

At least, that was what I imagined the farmhand was thinking about me. My mother had warned me that I might get such looks for wearing this deep shade of red.

I had stopped listening to the reverend’s description of the lunch being prepared for me an entire minute ago and had turned my attention to the man down the track who was staring at me behind his spectacles. Maybe it was those thick, round glasses that made him the most thoughtful looking man in a dusty shirt and suspenders that I had seen since leaving the city yesterday morning. There was no

animosity in his eyes; he didn't think me indecent like the reverend, in fact he looked rather pleased. Maybe he was discontented with the monotony of this little town, his curiosity for the world encumbered by his life in the field, I thought. He looked a bit alarmed, so I decided that he had been looking for me all day.

I searched every field and gully along the track for a flower more passionate looking than those prim little pink roses, but they were all as disinteresting as the class of young women I had just left. All just about the same, none daring to be more. Maybe the lack of bold hues spoke for the women around here too. Not for long, I had vowed, freshening my lipstick as the train pulled into the station. I would teach these girls to be ambitious, to be "fonts of knowledge," to never stifle their laughter. So too would the boys learn to admire them the way he was admiring me now. I smiled at him. I did not have much hope to find a man here who would not tell me I was talking over his head, but the astonishment in his eyes gave promise. I halfway heard the reverend say he was the son of the woman I would be living with, so I would find out soon enough.

Of course, it did not matter if he would grow fond of me or not. He could walk by and never speak to me, and that would be fine, so long as he thinks my lips are unlike any rose he has ever seen.